

Edged Weapons:

THE PISHQABZ FIGHTING DAGGER

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A *pishqabz* from the late Safavid period (1502-1722 AD) with chiseled floral design

A *pishqabz* (*pišqabz*) is an elegant weapon from the Iranian arsenal with special characteristics: it has a double-curved blade, the edge initially concave but ending in a convex tip, often of a reinforced thickness. Another characteristic of this weapon is the T-spine which extends along the back edge to the sharpened concave of the blade tip, though some later examples of the *pishqabz* do not have this spine nor indeed a sharpened back edge. Thus, there is a variety of shapes among this type of dagger, but generally the forte of the blade is wide and tapers sharply towards the tip; the pistol-shaped grip normally consists of two walrus ivory scales, secured either with visible or concealed rivets; steel bolsters separate the handle from the blade and some examples have a midrib on the front of the blade. The *pishqabz*

is also the only Persian weapon to have a bevelled edge, and in some examples, this area is polished blank so that the pattern of crucible steel is more visible alongside the polished area.

As to the definition of *pishqabz*, one should note that *pish* means the front part of anything and *qabz* is a shortened form of *qabze*: 'handle'. Note that the term *qabze* refers to any type of a weapon with a handle, including bows, such as the following: *qabze-ye shamshir* (sword handle), *qabze-ye khanjar* (dagger handle) and *qabze-ye krād* (knife handle). Additionally, Kāšefi Sabzevāri (1971/1350:347-393), who wrote the Safavid period manuscript *Futuvvatnāme-ye Soltāni*, uses the term *qabze* (the grip/handle) in reference to different sorts of weapons, such as the *qabze-ye tiq* (handle of a blade/sword) and *qabze-ye separ* (handle of a shield).

A *pishqabz* from the late Safavid period (1502-1722 AD) with chiseled floral design and chiseled inscriptions from the Qur'an on the handle straps

A *pishqabz* from the late Safavid period (1502-1722 AD) with chiseled floral design

The term *pishqabz* referred originally to an area of the body, i.e. in the middle, at the front, just below the stomach, and the dagger itself later came to be associated with this spot, hence its name: the *qabze* (handle) tucked into the belt just in front of the body. In describing the techniques of *varzeš pahlavāni* (the traditional wrestling and martial art of Iran), Aghili explains that wrestlers wear special trousers called *šalvārak* during matches. Four areas of the garment can be grabbed in a contest: a) the *pishqabz* (at the front); b) the *pasqabz* (the middle at the back); c) the *pishkāse* (front of the knee) and d) the *paskāse* (back of the knee). The wrestling trousers were called *tonoke* and consisted of five or six layers of leather sewn tightly together as protection against a technique of grabbing the *pishqabz* area of the trousers and pulling it using full force to throw an opponent. Persian daggers were worn in specific places on the body: the *khanjar* (*khanjarhā*) was primarily carried on the right side and the *kārd* on the left. It is safe to assume that the *pishqabz* dagger was tucked under the belt in the middle in front of the stomach and, consequently, the association of this body part with this weapon developed (see picture, p33).

The renowned Lexicon of Dehkhoda describes a *pishqabz* in the following terms: first, it gives an explanation of the handle, *qabz*, stating that it means 'to grip' or 'to hold in the hand,' further explaining that *pishqabz* is the name for a weapon and is named after a technique in wrestling. It further mentions that this weapon is called *leikī* in India.

A *pishqabz* from the Zand period (1750-1794 AD) with chiseled floral design and gilded inscription *Nasron Min Allah Wa Fathon Qarib* (God help us in the upcoming victory)

Additionally, it provides the following example for the use of the *pishqabz* in an extract from the manuscript of *Masnavi Gol Košti* written by Mirnejāt. It was written in the Safavid Period at the end of the reign of Shah Soleyman Safavid (1666-1694) and the beginning of the era of Shah Soltan Hossein Safavid (1694-1722). Chapter 13 of this manuscript deals with shooting (with bow and arrow), spear-fighting, riding a horse, wrestling and sharpening the sword. It states in one part:

Pišqabz-e hame dar panje-ye šāyeste-ye ust...

'The front part [of the girdle] of everyone is in his competent grip.'

Unlike *khanjarhā* and *kardhā*, *pishqabzhā* are rarely portrayed in Iranian miniatures. However, in a miniature from a manuscript of the *Shahname* from

the 10th century hegira (16th century AD), entitled 'The Killing of Iraj by his Brothers Salam and Tur', one of the brothers is holding a *separ* (shield) in his left hand above his head, and in his right hand is a *pishqabz* with which he is stabbing his unarmed brother, Iraj, in the throat. Iraj is shown falling to the ground (see picture, p33). Both the curved handle of the *pishqabz* and its curved blade are clearly depicted (see plate 178 in Bagher Najafi, 1997:371). One of the reasons the *pishqabz* is so rarely mentioned in manuscripts is that it has sometimes been referred to as a *khanjar*. Evidence for this hypothesis is the existence of the inscription:

Dasteye xanjarat jahāngir ast gar ĉe yek mošt ostexān bāšād

'The handle of your *khanjar* is the conqueror of the world despite that it is only made of bone.'

A *pishqabz* from the Zand period (1750-1794 AD) with chiseled floral design and handle straps

This inscription, specifically referring to the weapon, often appears on Persian *pishqabzhā* as well as on *khanjarhā*. It is indeed surprising that this line does not appear as *Dasteye pišqabzat jahāngir ast gar če yek mošt ostexān bāšad* (The handle of your *pishqabz* is the conqueror of the world...). It could be that the inscription was used as a fixed idiom on a variety of daggers. However, this line does not appear on *kārdhā* (see previous issue of CAAM) kept in either Iranian or European museums. However, this inscription appears on the handle of a *pishqabz* from the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran and a *pishqabz* from a private collection, in gold overlay between the handle and blade forte.

Surprisingly, Zoka (1971/1350:198) distinguishes between two forms of Safavid daggers, the Kurdish and the Indian *khanjar*. He states that Kurdish *khanjarhā* were smaller, had fullered blades and were double-edged. Zoka identifies the *pishqabz* as an Indian-style *khanjar*, asserting that they had a very sharp and slender single edge. The remarkable

Interestingly, antique dealers and collectors in Isfahan call the *pishqabz* a *shotorkosh*, which means literally 'camel killer'. In the past, camels were killed with a sharp weapon resembling a *pishqabz*. However, the Lexicon of Dehkhoda does not support this attribution and simply states that *shotorkosh* is a person who kills camels.

Although the *pishqabz* is hardly mentioned in Persian manuscripts, a certain dagger called the *deshne* features quite often, starting from the Samanid period (819-1000 AD) until the end of the Qajar period (1794-1924 AD) – such as *Garšāsbnāme*, *Ādāb al-Harb* va *al-Šojā-e*, *Tārix-e Jahāngošāy-e Nāderi*, *Šahanšahnāme*, and *Rostam al Tavārix*. The Lexicon of Dehkhoda describes *deshne* simply as a sharp dagger. It adds that both *deshne* and *khanjar* were carried by *ayyārān*, the elite fighters. The only Persian dagger that could match the descriptions of a *deshne* is the *pishqabz*. Future research will shed more light on

A *pishqabz* from the Zand period (1750-1794 AD) with chiseled floral design and gold-inlaid maker's mark *amal-e Qafur* (the work of Qafur)

feature is that the term *khanjar* is used to refer to this weapon, not *pishqabz*. This could be because this poem – *Dasteye xanjarat jahāngir ast gar če yek mošt ostexān bāšad* – simply uses *khanjar* as a generic term for 'dagger'. Zoka states that some men and women used two *khanjarhā* tucked under their belt, which was considered a symbol of pride. Since Zoka uses the term *khanjar* to symbolise both the double-edged *khanjar* and the single-edged *pishqabz*, it is unclear whether carrying a *pishqabz* together with a *khanjar* was considered a status symbol and a symbol of pride, or whether he is referring to carrying two *khanjarhā* or two *pishqabzhā*.

this assumption. The Persian manuscripts often refer to the watered steel of a *deshne* in expressions such as *dešne-ye ābdāde* [a watered/hardened dagger] and *dešne-ye ābrank* [a dagger with a colour like water]. In the manuscript *Ādāb al-Harb* va *al-Šojā-e*, it states that the *deshne* is the weapon used by *ayyārān*, *jānbāzān* (people who sacrifice their lives) and *dozdān* (thieves).

Pishqabz has been used as a term for all daggers with straight or double-curved blades as long as they had a wide forte and a T-spine. However, others are of the opinion that this name should be used

only for a dagger with a double-curved edge. Kobylinski (2000:65) describes the *pishqabz* as a weapon with a blade that narrows abruptly at the forte and narrows again towards the point, forming a sharp tip. He states that the *pishqabz* is a dangerous combat weapon and was used to thrust and pierce through mail armour, yet he does not provide any historical evidence for this statement. Kobylinski also states that there are some *pishqabz* with straight blades up to 50cm long, and some with 'S-shaped' blades, usually no longer than 25cm, the latter probably being decorative.

Many existing examples of *pishqabz* are not signed. Augustin (1993:198-9) describes two Persian *pishqabzhā* with T-sections and S-curved blades. The blades are double curved and have thick backs that measure 1.6cm and 2cm. One of the blades has engravings and gold inlay surfaces. This characteristic is a typical Iranian feature and does not exhibit any foreign influence. One of these *pishqabzhā* is signed 'Amal-e Baqer ibn Mahdi' and the other is signed 'Ali Akbar'.

A *pishqabz* with a straight blade from the Zand period shows that such straight blades coexisted with double curved blades. The *ahanak* (handle straps) of this piece have engraved inscriptions from the Qur'an, reading:

Bismellah al Rahman al Rahim

*Qol Howa Allaho Ahad Allaho alSamad
Lam Yalid wa lam Yoolad Wa Lam Yakon
laho Kuffwan Ahad 1190.*

'In the name of Allah, most benevolent ever merciful, say: "HE IS God, the one,

A miniature from the Safavid period showing a warrior cutting the throat of his opponent using a *pishqabz*; note that he is holding his left hand on the T-spine of the blade to add more power to his cut. (Courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum)



A *pishqabz* from the Early Qajar period (1794-1925 AD) with gold-overlaid floral design and gold-overlaid inscriptions at the base: *dasteye xanjarat jahāngir ast gar če yek most ostexān bāšad* (The handle of your *xanjar*/*xanjar* is the conqueror of the world despite that it is only made of bone)

the most unique. God the eminently indispensable. He has begotten no one and is begotten of none. There is no one comparable to him 1190.' (1775 AD)

Additionally, the name of the owner is engraved on the back of the blade close to the handle: *Sāhebe Mohammad Mehdi Khān Zand* (The owner Mohammad Mehdi Khan Zand). The name of the smith is gold inlaid on the blade and reads 'Mehri Ali'. There is a spade-shaped eyelet at the base of the handle

A miniature from the *Shahname* Qavām from 1000 hegira (1591 AD) (the Safavid period); note that the man is using his *pishqabz* to stab his opponent in the throat (the same way camels were killed in the past). (Courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum)



with *Howal Kafi* (one of the names of God, meaning that God is independent and without needs) engraved on one side, and *Howal Baqi* (another attribute of God, meaning that he is eternal) on the other.

There are examples of *pishqabz* with a very slight curve, one such example being from the Military Museum of Tehran (museum inventory number 208). This *pishqabz* has a slight curve, and on the *āhanak* (tang bands) is an engraved inscription: *Ruzi ke hičkas nabud dādras marā* (When there is no one to listen to my requests). The second engraved part is missing. Judging from the similar inscription on other pieces, such as the *shamshir* with the official seal of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, the missing part probably reads: *Yā mortezā Ali to beres be faryād ras marā* (Oh Ali, you should help me). On the other side of the *āhanak* is a red-painted, lacquered area written on steel (the style is similar to a *champlevé* technique, where the entire surface is covered with a red lacquer and the inscriptions can be seen through it): *La Hola Walla Qowata Ella BeAllah al-Ali alAzim* (There is no power mightier than the power of God, the Supreme, the Tremendous).

In the same manner as *kardhā*, a variety of decorative methods are used at the forte of *pishqabz* daggers. Examples exist with chiselled fortes in floral design as well as those decorated with *zarneshān* – that is, the use of a gold-inlaying technique in the form of relief. The *āhanak* (handle straps) are also either gold overlaid, chiselled or without decoration, although combinations of gold inlay and chiselling on both *āhanak* and forte are known.



Iraj is being killed by his brothers Salam and Tur. From a manuscript of the *Shahname* from the 10th century hegira (16th century AD); note a *pishqabz* is being used for stabbing and killing Iraj. (Courtesy of National Library of Iran)

Also in the same manner as *kardhā*, the scabbard of *pishqabz* consists of two different wooden parts glued together, then covered with shagreen leather. Some of them are undecorated but others exhibit relief work. There are also examples with scabbards made of chased silver. Some *pishqabz* scabbards have a steel chape (*kafšak*) and others are made of one solid piece of walrus ivory. There are also examples with engraved, all-metal handles and scabbards, one such with engravings of different animals.

Full list of references available on request.



Holding the *pishqabz* of the trunk of the opponent in *varzeš pahlavāni* (the traditional wrestling and martial art of Iran); note that the wrestler on the left is holding the middle of the trunk of the wrestler on the right and the wrestler on the right is fending off this technique by holding the wrist of his opponent. (Courtesy of Habibollah Bolur “Fan va Band-e Koshti”)



A *pishqabz* from the Early Qajar period (1794–1925 AD) with gold-overlaid floral design